

00¹/₄≈||»γ, / ' ; ôô¹/₂ ||-«||Ñ| a+|| [] \
=γ¹/₂||ó||¹/₄≈||-γ||»γ, . . . / ' ; ôô¹/₂ ||-«||Ñ| a+|| [] ||` ||ó||¹/₂||=\\

He does fire a poetry out.

5
Afterlight 1 : The Mermaid's Cape

Within that kind of sun-room which rambled from post Victorian houses, here a sofa with a brick or books substituting for a carved legs between card tables and chairs scattered around the icy waves of the linoleum floor. This stuck-on sunporch of an older building at the veterans hospital in West Haven, Connecticut.

Grimy individual panes of glass break up one surly thunderhead in the sky outside. The round picture tube of an ancient television console holds that thunderhead in ghostly miniature. An unlit brass lamp is atop the television, a tiny bit of warmth.

Her form went by the glass panes, bulky flying, a glass door shook and slammed. "What's the idea of the dark she asked. "Is it it dark enough out there?"

What is it ever? The idea of dark His voice was as loud as the ticking the window panes behind her, she could barely make him out seated at a card table which contained a portable typewriter. "I like it he went on, "this idea of yours about the idea of dark, as if there were no actual dark and you came here to share this idea, or rather this idea of an idea, with me. It's all so very interesting but I'm unfortunately ignorant of everything I say.

Sometimes I just think that you talk to weary yourself.

Or you? Listen! I can turn around and go! Her clothes rustled.

Listen to you

I'm so beat anyway as she sunk into a metal chair still some distance from his dim presence.

Exhaustion and despair pronounced his monotone, "the gold dust twins of were middle age.

And suddenly the windows awash with rain which momentarily brightened the room, revealing to her his fatigue uniform, the shirt of which is covered with company patches such as Ford and John Deere, plus a few army regiment patches, and some slogans, chief of which were STAY HIGH IN HELL and NAM: ONE GOLDEN YEAR. They listened to the rain, droning now though huge drops were smacking some drain pipe nearby. She picked up a coverless it would have no interest, tossed it away and then to him, peck him on the forehead, brass highlights in her red hair. I'm sorry for the actual dark down nearer him. When you take this new medicine

or some medical folkshit. The doctor, another new

but not from Minneapolis but a more or less happy Swede, - well he didn't tell me before he left.

a green scrubsuit and
I read up on it in the mediaal library. I Aput 0
look like a battered doctor
You know all do the tricks by now. Too many. Anyway, they're
using it on some of the Agent Orange kids
too. You're sitting in Agent Orange Headquarters right now, me
banging
It

out ten letters a week with two popsickle fingers.
Didn't some of that swelling go down?
Never. But I'm do it even think about it anymore. These
Vietnam kids as their expiring lobbyist.
have given me one last shot at life. One of them even gave me
this uniform.
Is it that something After years of stylish army pyjamas I doest
know what to say.of
Newsweek as if knowing lurched up to go over from the lamp
sliding he whispered as:.lshe sat yo|re photosensitive
docto≥yo|d like him, hos

His chair chattered across the cold linoleum as he hopped a
little

in his enthusiasm. vhe!s wearing m now so I can wear this.
That's their
trouble, these kids: They'd give you anything. It's why they
were just right for Nam. My generation ate shit, steaming.
That's why we were just right for Korea.
V?

Her muffled voiceeom he wide nest of her clothing: áI caet
say

I'm in the mood for any of your mini-lectures, Skipper.
ìI never am. H0w are the children?lSame. it Waiting for slow
old Mister Death. The bells have been tolling forever, through
the dozens of drugs and hopes. Ah the endless fugue of the
dance of death, sucking life from me the dancer even as it's
sucked from all of you till we all of us are victims of deepest
down bone-exhaustion. And some mornings the pain in just
lifting one finger when I beg to go. Now try not to cry. I
know it's selfish of me but ... I can't take it.
I'm... cried out.

just
She didilift move as he wrenched up towards her,but dragged
himself around the area of his cardtable desk. áAll t ese years
married to an eggplant. My God I almost got you to laugh. When
I think of the way we started, the frozen-ass craziness. Long
long ago as the sun runs and runs and runs past ice lakes ...
past fire. You did warn me then that someone was walking on my
grave.Just and she patted smooth her cape and skirt,áan

expression.

The rain beat on the drainpipe with ferocity. The grass must be worn off it by now. Never mind all that now. Tell me why you have to hide in the dark.

if I go into the light¹/₄ I'll die. Blotch to death. Actually I heard about this photosensitive baloney from the tube here, a show they pipe in for the doctors.

That thinks a museum piece.

If you wish a short history of technology since technology is killing me--all pictures tubes used to be round like this. Zenith just decided not to make it this year. There must be many of these left. Just this one in my office-bedroom and a couple retained at Indian reservations I figure. Once they see all of nature in a circle. Your office and bedroom. Right. You can always extract the least interesting topic. Anyway, I got permission to live and work here, the crank, the advocate, bridge between Korea and Vietnam. I'm forgotten, and they're a pain in the ass, these Nam kids. In another ten years or so some other kids can get their balls shot off and I'll be the Nam vets forgotten. But I'll be long long dead by then. You know, my mother never raised her boy to be a soldier, and my father was a kind of diffident soldier for my mother's genteel causes.

it

He deserves rows of medals. A typical American hero of nothing. Dad still comes around to see the kids. He's so sweet. But she won't. The impending divorce. Catholic. Whatever. Though it's not quite final yet I guess you know. It's final. You're to go out and get a real husband, not an eggplant. He struck a key on the typewriter for emphasis and she wrapped her arms around herself, the shadows of raindrops running along her white hands. No. I'll not marry again; I just want to live alone. With the kids until they leave and then alone. I ... want to talk to myself about everything for years and years. I don't think I'll ever stop because there's so much I want to say, so much I want to ask myself. I know that I'm divorcing you

and divorcing that part of my life. I know that I'm doing that and that

I must do it ... but I do et know why. Not exactly. When I'm alone I'll get the chance to ask myself why about everything. Can you understand that, Skip?

He had been shuffling over to the windows and now was tracing the humped top of a thunderhead cloud, the raindrops stippling his fatigues, and one patch STAY HIGH IN HELL alowine with red florescent letters. She noted the floppy back of his jacket, a E;owlini shirt kind of script: KILL EM ALL AND LET GOD Understand it? Nope. Ask yourself why about everything ? Why bother? /SORT EM OUT.

Cause there'ss no why in any big sense. I'm here because I stumbled into some primitive military experiment years ago which turned me into a kind of mushroom as the years , blit why didi God or Fate or whatever fuck me over that greviously? The more I thought about it the less I knew. The more you think the less you know. The more you find out the less you know. She shook her head, the slight movemcnt of her clothes making him turn from the window to her. áI know I'll find the answers for myself. Not for you, not for anybo4,olse. But for myself yes

He Pee A at her but his eyes instantly lost focus. áYou'll marry again. For life. No eggplant this time. No way, Skipper∞And whaf his ams flew out, palms up.Ildo we say at this final, still point? What is there to say?ìIts been said and resaid. ìMy Maureen O'Hara He started for her but stumbled, catching himself fiercely, indicating as she tried to rise, that she shouldn't help him; then he shuffled painfully back to his chair at the card table, her closing her eyes as he gripped the table for a full minute, then fell ini the metal chair. áLike her. The redhead he gasped. áBeautiful and cheeky. oh pretty yo r hair... ìDoet. Forget it. I[s the past. I[s hard nough now with the divorce ...

Forget the Catholic bit yourself he whispered. It was easy to promise then, bursting with crazy life. How could we anticipate?

How could they? The're not in the anticipating business. Let them walk through hell in their brocaded vestments or through a jungle of bleeding kids, or be on the ward when they bring these shrieking grunts in. Hell, they could swing a little incense out of the golden censor. The Heads'd love it.áWhy blame them, the Church?

I blame evezybody∞

Why?

Cause everybody aint enough!

Another dead end. Do you talk about these things with your psychiatrist?

My new one? He's too nice.

He let his forehead fall to the typewriter. áEndlessly.

Poor Skip. My poor old Skip.

Excuse me while I cut through your pity in order to die. ...oops,

did it work that time. But I'm getting better.

The light had darkened in the old sunporch and when he lifted his head from the typewriter he looked dead to her, his face white, his eyes flat reflections of the surly clouds outside.

He slowly p d the keys on the typewriter by twos and threes to make a jam. But then quickly unstuck them and turned fully to her. áNo. Iwon't play. This ... your last visitáSkipi I

certainly intend to-ñìNo. I wouldst want you to. Let's join us by light anyway. Clicked onthe brass lamp and a weak orangy

light flowed down. áWhat is that? lie madea great effort to focus his eyes. áIt's a ... capel I believe in miracles Except

the one that these doctors might be right once in their treatment of choice. But religious miracles yesill

Ilk6w dont jump back on religion. Well it's folklore rdally-

It's just that your cape will make our

77

parting easier, will explain to you by logic and to me by poetry.áI got it in a thrift shop near Yale. A few dollars. áA steall You be careful I doest steal it now. áAnd what did you read that brings this on?ìI doest read¼ he sweeps one arm. áI let it flow in. It joins

other seas.ìWhatever. ìWhatever ifs ... what Fver ... I« He was furiously rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands.ìSkipl

Stop thatllìOh. Sorry. Ever ... in the movies when the film stops and you see a frame burning. Just this now one burned on

me. one burns every day. Clockwork. ifs my clockwork. if I were good in Math I could tell you how many I have left. ìGod

helpyou¼ she whispered) the rain whipping the glass.ìHe has done enough to me, but back to folklore and why the cape makes

everything easier.ìMaybe God led me to buy it. She adjusted the

cape around heille , ck. Did he offer to pay too? Mon God! You never buy a fuckin round! why you so cheap? I take it back! He's been known to spring at the country club. ia Ekes a better class. Ah hah and even a hint of a smile from my Maureen Hara. Yo'll never quit till I have. And when they lower me down I hope it's nice weather for you and the kids. If yo're busting with a story or something, why doest you go ahead and say it? Story of my life. Always exposing myself. Now doest look at your watch again.

78

leáEasy for you to say. She drew her white arm into the cape. Everything'd be easy to say if I could just give up trying to

connect things.

A little le r ing, old Bucko.

aR

Ah now you are my Maureen Hara in The Quiet Man. I got the red hair is al. Look at this thick body plumped down on this stupid chair in this...hellish damp. This is the last story I I . ever tell you and when I finish yo'll - o go back to the old stories leave with an ovarbrimming heart cause you

to find a heart. And because of the story yo'll never come back here.

Yo'll never come back.

What happens at such a time? when a truth is recognized which could never have been spoken of before this instant?i -The sounds of life swim in, amplified , the rain outside, the creaks of their chairs, the old porch shifting in the gusts of win 5, p 4 -sr) cc,4, , , k f ìOh Skipper¹/₄ she was cryir)g, áI heard other stories from you and they-I, Stop. He put up his hand like a traffic cop and it looked even more pale and swollen in the dim glow from the brass lamp. áToo weak for you, Maureen! You're my fighter and I doest want to hear you give up. ìI've done all I've could¹/₄ she sobbed. ItIti

s finished me, Skipper.

You have. She daubed at her cheeks with the cape. It's an Irish story, thus one in our bones. In the cold bones of

the world. And how much is parody? You're picking up the
bullshit brogue
already.
it I can make fun of most things but not this one. There's a
salt
stamp down in it, a sting like the seals lash. This is not
the way you talk.
It's talking through me.

79

I used to be able to tell, how much you were making fun.
Whatever... I've got to go soon. I don't want the kids to be
eating TV dinners. It's the one resolve I've been able to hold
to.
He pointed a thick finger to the windows where rain was
washing, bubbles in the breaks like the putty like tears. It
was the dark chill of a washing-down day like this when
Her white hand shot out from the cape. I can't stand this bard.
What you're witnessing is a melting. Since everything melts in
me courtesy of my lingering disease, why then this story has
melted too and I'm it. You got ten minutes. World versus
art. It's five.
Enough. Well then this Irish farmer goes out to fish in
some freezing green and slippery seaweed place somewhere, some
black Irish rock in piercing cold gray, and he discovers a
mermaid. You laugh?
She pushed her red hair back to stretch her forehead. Oh
sometimes a woman gets hammered out so by life that this kind
of, I don't know, female of the fancy, of whimsey, cheers one a
bit. Something like that.
She sat very still at the edge of the weak lamplight; he went on
with his story, the candle almost dancing as he gripped it, the
jacket;

with its numerous patches, shaking.
She has placed her beautiful cape beside her while she combs
her hair,

the cape woven of seaweed and flowers and studded with shells
and coral and

iridescent fish scales.
The JPC Vq, nei For which his is a poor substitute.
Well he watched her on that black rock, this farmer, but he

especially

watched that cape for he knew its magic, of course, that she'd have to

80

come and do his bidding if he got it. So when she fanned out her tresses and turned to get the most of the breeze he seized it, and commanded that she go back to the farm with him. Did he carry her or did she sort of flop down the byways? He commanded her to become an ordinary woman of course. But with a hell of a past.

If the magic in the cape made this easy enough. So she got her two legs and trouble in between. Hardly a magic result. If you wish. The lamplight seemed brighter suddenly, the panes thick with black rain. New drops pocked in with, audible snaps. Is your story? she sighed. Half. Well she became the farmer's wife and worked and worked of course and had child after child. Good Catholics on the grimmest of spits of lands.

And her always trying to get that cape back. You know her well, Maureen. What choice do we have? A man steals your very nature away.

Anything in your power to get it back. He hid it every day before he went out to the fields and she spent what time she could searching. But one dank and cold sea-wind morning he got careless, one of the children, a girl, seeing him bury it under the thatch of the cottage, reporting it to her mother, the oddity of what she had seen her father do. And with him still heading to the fields, <part to her leaving soon> the knuckles still blue and freezing on his red and purple and freckled Irish hands, she climbed up there.

V.M. own Get it. Maureen I ; ob A irfto ber/cape. Fix the son of a bitch. She is soon enough sliding into the gray-green sea, that cape blowing gorgeously behind her. So so gorgeously

81

And now she shows him her full white face as she leans forward, tears the icy linoleum. And the children? Back with that thick brute?

His voice became spooky and grating. áThey endured. The way we
all do. ,But they had to stay out of the sea since she'd drown
them of course.íìIn her love? In her anger? bkftl
;Qmrml= - To kill them to have them to love them,
to entirely posses them. To hurt him. To hurt him whatever the
cost. Oh how all the ideas spin and spin in my head! You must
get loose of that. You must get loose of everything.to
She rose at his falsetto voice, her chair clattering away.
He stared at her leaving, and her last space,wet gusts flapping
his clothes,
until a draft finally blew the door shut.